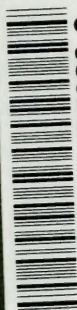


HAMLET AND

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HENRY WOODALL



Miss May Walter  
in appreciation of her charming  
readings from Tennyson.  
July 22. 1908. H.H.



Hamlet and Macbeth  
Oppositely Interpretive



# Hamlet and Macbeth

## Oppositely Interpretive

BY

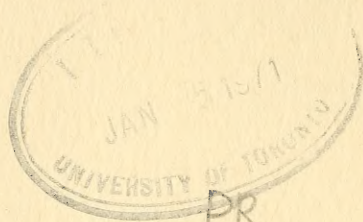
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## HAMLET AND MACBETH

### Oppositely Interpretive

**M**ORE than a hundred years ago, Goethe, in his 'Wilhelm Meister,' conceived that 'Shakspeare meant in "Hamlet," to represent the effects of a great action, laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it.' 'Impossibilities have been required of him: not in themselves impossibilities, but such to him.' And, blinded apparently by the splendour of his name and fame, the world, speaking generally, has accepted Goethe's interpretation as the true one. Gervinus speaks of 'the riddle as thus solved, and little being left to say in its elucidation.'

Schlegel agrees, and says, 'the world was against Hamlet.' Our own commentators never fail to quote Goethe, and generally place themselves in accord. Yet what a lame and impotent conclusion it is ! for there was never moral weakling for whom the same excuse could not be made.

'Impossibilities were required of Hamlet.' Is such a solution worthy of our trusty Shakspeare? If the safe load for an animal be a hundred-weight, and twice that weight be placed upon it, the poor creature fails, and we arraign his master at the bar of justice. Correspondingly, if our hero succumbs, however much we may pity him, we must arraign the author, who is solely responsible for the catastrophe. What of the moral? If the load is too heavy, the result is inevitable ; and the only moral is, that it is a mistake to place a horse's load upon an ass. Now, is this Shakspeare's manner? Does he ask too much of his heroes? Is it not rather a blemish in his work that

the initial error is so glaring, so easy of avoidance, that we instinctively cry 'Oh, fool, fool !' as we see the victim stumble ? In each of his other great tragedies, 'Macbeth,' 'King Lear,' 'Othello,' we see the catastrophe brought about by the sin, or error, of the chief personage. We see the overtrustfulness of Lear, and the distrustfulness of Othello, as severely dealt with, as the active wickedness of Macbeth. In 'Romeo and Juliet,' the only difference is in the circumstance that it is the folly of the parents, who are a little in the background, which is visited upon the children, and recoils upon themselves. In every instance, the offence carries the penalty, and the widespread ruin which engulfs the innocent with the guilty, lies at the door of the offender. Hamlet is brought, as mercilessly as any other, under the rigour of this rule. Let it be understood that it is not the crimes of Claudius which constitute the theme of this play, for these had been committed before the

drama opens. The theme is Hamlet's disloyalty. To this he falls a prey, and through this are also sacrificed the lives of Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Laertes, and the Queen.

So viewed we see that constructively this work is brought into agreement with all the others to which reference has been made, in so far that the audience may perceive the dropping of the seed error, out of which grows the catastrophe. This aspect of the play I desire to enforce firmly, believing that it best interprets the mind of Shakspeare. There are almost as many theories concerning Hamlet, as there are critics, and there is conflict of opinion in all directions. Such ambiguity, and uncertainty in characterization, as this divergence indicates, would not be regarded as complimentary in another author, and our Shakspeare suffers from detraction so long as he is unexplained. Now let us suppose that his purpose, in

this, as in other plays, was to present to the eye upon the stage, and not less to the intellect in the study, the insidious growth of evil. It will at once be seen that all the old effort to justify Hamlet is labour lost, and must be abandoned. What follows? Simply that Hamlet falls into line with all the other great personages referred to above, and instead of being the exemplar of virtue, becomes the prey of vice ; the error which he commits at the outset, expanding and developing, till all the noble substance 'takes corruption from that particular fault.' The speech from which I quote, Act I. sc. 4, is manifestly the 'argument' of this the first, and all the other three great tragedies which followed ; each of which is concerned with 'some vicious mole of nature,' 'the o'ergrowth of some complexion,' or 'some habit that too much o'erleavens' the characters of men who otherwise were 'as pure as grace' ; and it is curious to observe that the vicious

is virtue unwatched, and run to folly. Looked at in this light, that is to say, if we credit Shakspeare with an ethical purpose, many of those contradictions which have been so disconcerting in our estimate of Hamlet, disappear, and the circumstances generally, combine to form a sequence which cannot be regarded as accidental—which must be of design. Hamlet's culpability is more conspicuous than that of the other characters named, Macbeth excepted, and the great dramatist could hardly have made his dereliction more palpable, without drawing contempt upon him to such a degree as would prejudice the character upon the stage. The view of Hamlet which I desire to present, is taken in association with Macbeth, and supposes the two characters to have been conceived in the poet's mind at the same time: Hamlet with a bent towards thought, Macbeth with a bent towards action, the one to be the opposite of the other. From this stand-

point, we see the mighty master launching forth upon their several careers two men of splendid mould—both high-placed, both with fertile intellects, both courageous, both loyal, but each with a ‘dram of ill’ in his moral constitution. In one, the defect is a disposition to speculate, and dally. In the other, there is a proneness to precipitate the event. What is to happen to each when ‘the common enemy of man,’ finds him unwatchful of his defect? This the dramas tell. To formulate my view, I would say, that Shakspeare’s purpose in ‘Hamlet’ and ‘Macbeth’ is to portray the effect of disloyalty to conscience, on opposite natures ; and to demonstrate, that neglect of duty may be as treasonable and disastrous as active villainy. In both these plays, as in others, we have revealed, the evolution of faults—easy of avoidance at first, but gathering force with time and circumstance, until their mastery is complete and overwhelming.

That Shakspeare regarded thought and action as antithetic, is evidenced by the lines—

And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of *thought* ;  
And enterprises of great pith and moment,  
With this regard, their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of *action*.

Subject to the taint bred of their several bents, Hamlet and Macbeth are loyal, until they are confronted by the supernatural. It is remarkable, however, that Shakspeare applies this force (the supernatural) in inverse ratio to the apparent necessity. So, at any rate, it would seem to most of us, in the absence of the profounder knowledge which he brings to bear on the problem. Hamlet is encountered by a 'spirit of health,' in the graced person of his father, in whose presence he exclaims—

I'll call thee Hamlet,  
King, father ! Royal Dane, O, answer me

Let me not burst in ignorance, but tell  
Why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death,  
Have burst their cerements ?

All uncertainty, we see, has vanished with acquaintance, and after the first moment's excitement and alarm, Hamlet fully accepts the apparition, as being no other than his own father, who, notwithstanding that he comes from purging fires, was so esteemed for his virtues, that he is spoken of as 'canonized.' This gracious spirit comes, more in sorrow than in anger, reveals the circumstances of his wife's betrayal, and his own murder, and urges upon his son the duty of 'Revenge'—the more dramatic expression for retribution. It was Hamlet's duty to obey, had he been only a soldier or a citizen ; it was doubly and trebly his duty, being son and heir to the throne.

Dr. Bradley, in his most admirable and charming work 'Shakespearean Tragedy,' a work more interesting and informing

than any I have met with, says : ‘ Hamlet was a man, I venture to affirm, who at any *other* time, and in any *other* circumstances than those presented, would have been perfectly equal to his task, and it is, in fact, the very cruelty of his fate that the crisis of his life comes to him at the one moment when he cannot meet it, and when his highest gifts instead of helping him conspire to paralyse him.’

There is much to attract in this theory, but I cannot regard it as conclusive, or wholly consistent with the text.

In the first place, Hamlet’s delinquency was not of a momentary character ; for through several months, and with everything in his favour, he made no effort to retrieve the situation, but knowingly, and in shame, continued to waste his opportunities. Further, in the crisis of his life—the hour in which he first met the Ghost—he showed the fullest ability, and a daring courage which was absolutely appalling to his friends. And this

capability is fully recognised by the Ghost himself, who says :

I find thee apt.

Again, why should Shakspeare portray a character who is *out* of himself just when he should be *all* himself? If he is not to be regarded as responsible for his actions what interest need we have in him ; and what a foolish Ghost to have visited him just when he should have stayed away ! Once more. Macbeth, the over-sanguine man of action, is snared in the hour of his elation and triumph. Are we to palliate his conduct on that account? He knew and recognised his offence ; but not more certainly than Hamlet, the man of thought, recognised his. Each followed his natural bent, instead of keeping it subservient to his judgment. What is there between the two characters and situations but their *oppositeness*? Surely this oppositeness, which crops out in all directions, is the key to the mystery.

We now turn to Macbeth. High-placed and happy, beloved and honoured of his king, he has 'bought golden opinions from all sorts of people.' At this stage he is met, not by a 'spirit of health,' but by 'filthy hags,' who use no word of command, or appeal, to provoke him to disloyalty, but only tell of honours present, and to come. He is Thane of Cawdor. He shall be king. The prophets are detestable, yet the sanguine disposition of Macbeth is inflamed on the instant; and though many considerations crowd themselves upon his mind, and urge resistance to the sinful impulse, he permits his better judgment to be overruled, and is straightway launched upon his terrible career. And so, in the case of Hamlet, we see that every consideration of love, loyalty, kinship, duty, profit, place, and power, call for action, yet the result is *drift*; while in the person of Macbeth all these considerations counsel repose—and the result is, *action*. The aspect of evil is

made repulsive, and the provocation to do wickedly is so reduced as to be scarcely evident as regards Macbeth ; while Hamlet's duty is enforced as by the command of Heaven. Some provocation Macbeth must have felt of course, and it is found in the witches' prophecy, that Banquo's issue shall be kings. It is not satisfying to him to be king : there must be succession in his own line. The possibility of this, however, is designedly made remote, for there is no mention of issue, unless a babe at the breast, and Macbeth has 'fallen into the sear.'

The opposite natures of the two characters—Hamlet and Macbeth—has frequently been remarked upon, and, indeed, must be apparent to all ; but my object is to show that Shakspeare designed them to be opposites, and through them to illustrate the dangers that beset a swerving from the true course, whether on the one hand or the other. Macbeth dashes himself against Scylla. Hamlet drifts

into Charybdis. The following quotations are culled in evidence.

Hamlet, speaking of the Ghost, says :  
His form and cause conjoined, preaching to  
stones,  
Would make them capable.

Macbeth, speaking of his enchanters, the Witches, says :  
Infected be the air whereon they ride,  
And damned all those who trust them.

Hamlet called the usurper whom he should dethrone,  
Remorseless, treacherous, kindless villain.

Macbeth, speaking of Duncan, says :  
His virtues  
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued,  
against  
The deep damnation of his taking off.

Hamlet, weak and untrue, suspects in most directions, and is lavish in vituperation.

Macbeth has no grievance against anyone.

Hamlet says:

How *all occasions* do inform against me,  
And *spur* my dull revenge.

Macbeth says :

I have *no spur*  
To prick the sides of my intent.

Hamlet is indifferent to what the day  
may bring forth :

Since no man has aught of what he leaves  
what is 't to leave betimes.

Macbeth sees ever the future in the  
instant :

The flighty purpose never is o'ertook  
Unless the deed go with it.

Hamlet says :

I could be bounded in a nutshell, and  
think myself a king of infinite space, but  
that I have bad dreams.

Macbeth sleeps nightly in the affliction  
of terrible dreams, yet says :

For mine own good all causes shall give  
way.

Hamlet is sought out, and importuned, by the 'spirit of health.'

Macbeth goes in quest of his 'filthy hags.'

Hamlet is unimaginative. Macbeth is intensely imaginative.

Hamlet degrades the loftiest sublimities.

Macbeth spiritualises the meanest creatures.

Hamlet leaves undone the thing he ought to have done.

Macbeth does the thing he ought not to have done.

And there is no health in either.

This oppositeness characterises in a remarkable way the *dramatis personæ* of the two plays. In 'Hamlet' there is no single character who is not veiled, and almost inscrutable ; while in 'Macbeth' all are practically true to their face values.

Now to combat the impression that the world was against Hamlet—an impression which can have had but the flimsiest

foundation, for the facts all point the other way.

He had a father, a highly respected king, to whom the state was indebted for extension of territory. A king, who possessed 'a form where every god did seem to set his seal, to give the world assurance of a man.'

Hamlet himself, is a prince, graced with the 'courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword.' He is 'the expectancy and rose of the fair state'—'the observed of all observers.' He is very popular with the masses—

Who, dipping all his faults in their affection,  
Convert his gyves to graces.

The principal courtiers about the palace are old schoolfellows, and come to him as 'excellent good friends.' He is in the very pride of life—thirty years of age. He is in love with Ophelia, daughter of the Lord Chamberlain, and the attachment is favoured by King and Queen.

He is a skilled swordsman, stating that since Laertes returned to France, he has been in continual practice. On the other hand, the King is described as bloat, and given to excess. He is satisfied that no one knows his guilt, and is therefore unrestrainedly solicitous to give full scope to Hamlet, in his desire to lift him out of his melancholy. He says, sincerely enough—

And we beseech you, bend you to remain  
Here in the cheer, and comfort of our eye,  
Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.

This status continues, until Hamlet undermines it by resorting to the play scheme; and even after this, the King gives an unequivocal opportunity to him, while on his knees. Then, to show what Hamlet should have done, the dramatist introduces a contrast. Laertes is in France, when he hears of his father's death, which has been erroneously attributed to the King. Upon this false

report, he comes like wrath personified,  
and sword in hand, braves the King in  
his palace, exclaiming :

Oh thou vile King, give me my father !

*Queen.* Calmly, good Laertes.

*Laertes.* That drop of blood that 's calm  
proclaims me bastard.

Where is my father ?

*King.* Dead.

*Laertes.* How came he dead? I'll not be  
juggled with.

To hell allegiance ! Vows to the blackest  
devil !

I dare damnation. To this point I stand,  
That both the worlds I give to negligence.  
Let come what comes ; only I'll be revenged  
Most throughly for my father.

And this for poor old Polonius, who was  
ever the butt for Hamlet's ribaldry, until  
the moment when he slew him ! Lastly,  
Hamlet says himself :

I do not know

Why yet I live to say, ' This thing 's to do,'

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Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and  
means  
To do't.

In presence of all this, how can it be said, 'the world is against him'? The world is with him, and every circumstance is favourable. He only is wanting; and he only is to blame for all the calamities that follow.

Again, it is often insisted upon that Hamlet was highly scrupulous, and naturally shunned the thought of taking life upon the testimony of an apparition. This assumption, however, is even less warrantable than the foregoing, for so far from the thought of taking the King's life being uncongenial to him, he is positively revolting in his vindictiveness. Witness the lines :

I am pigeon-livered and lack gall  
To make oppression bitter, or ere this  
I should have fatted all the region kites  
With this slave's offal.

And again, Act III. sc. 3.

Then trip him that his heels may kick at  
heaven

And that his soul may be as damned and  
black

As hell whereto it goes.

Still in further proof that he is not punctilious about blood-shedding, he kills Polonius, and the deed done, wishes it had been the King.

We next proceed to observe that both Hamlet and Macbeth were disloyal to the calls of duty, and of conscience. Macbeth's conduct, however, is undisguised, and it is only necessary to inquire into Hamlet's. But first, I think it should be understood, that the Ghost in 'Hamlet,' and the Witches in 'Macbeth,' are the stage representations of good, and evil principles, warring in men's minds, and that throughout, Shakspeare is enforcing the moral, that when once our loyalty to what is true, and noble, is enfeebled, it is

practically impossible to retrieve the lost position. Of course, this statement, as to the sphere of the Ghost and Witches, must not be taken too strictly ; for, no doubt, Shakspeare gives us something of himself ; and something too is thrown in for stage effect.

Hamlet was called upon by his noble father to 'revenge' his 'foul and most unnatural murder.' The act demanded by the Ghost, we must regard as one of righteous retribution—a proper call upon the duty, and allegiance, of the prince his son. Hamlet recognises his duty, and is eager to obey, exclaiming—

Haste me to know it, that I with wings as  
 swift  
 As meditation, or the thoughts of love,  
 May sweep to my revenge.

A few minutes later, however, when left alone, the 'word' he recalls, and adopts, is not the loyal and energising word 'Revenge,' but the untrue, makeshift, non-

committing 'Remember me.' The substitution was an act of moral cowardice, lowering to the high tone of mind which he had previously evinced. We shall see presently how this little unworthy leaven that creeps in so unsuspectedly, 'mining all within,' 'corrupts the noble substance,' and how the specious yoke of remembrance, which in a weak moment he had preferred to action, becomes an intolerable burden to Hamlet, who vainly tries to cast it off. This 'Remember me,' is the only quotation Hamlet ever makes from all the Ghost had said, yet even here, as I have shown, though true in word, he is untrue in spirit. Here it may be remarked that, except in presence of the Ghost, Hamlet never speaks of a command—never wills to do. His obligation will assert itself from time to time, but he is continually doing what he can to banish the thought of it. The initial error, above referred to, bears immediate and kindred consequence; for having only sworn to re-

member, he may choose his own time for action, which is not the present. And so when Horatio, Marcellus, and Bernardo enter, instead of enlisting them for active service, he merely binds them to secrecy, while at the same time, there runs through his mind, the notion of 'an antic disposition' which, if 'put on,' will enable him to procrastinate, without extreme violence to his conscience. He is the more culpable in this, because the fact of the Ghost having previously visited the soldiers in the fort, should be received as evidence that public distrust (thus reflected) has been aroused in connection with the death of the King; while he himself has confessed to his suspicion. Now is the time to act: the tide is at flood. He fails to take it, and henceforth 'the voyage of his life is bound in shallows and in miseries.' Says Goethe: 'Here is an oak, planted in a costly vase, which should have received only lovely flowers; the roots spread out, the vase is shivered

to pieces.' It is a wretchedly artificial metaphor, and as untrue as artificial. The tree (the great commission) never expanded root or branch, for one single hour, from the time it was placed within the vase. On the contrary, it dwindled and died. How could it have been otherwise? It received no sustenance from within, and was refused the aid, and support, which in abundance it might have had from without. The 'costly vase' (Hamlet) was shattered, not from within, but from without, and quite accidentally.

I now advance to a consideration of the famous soliloquy, so much extolled, so little comprehended.

*Hamlet.* To be, or not to be? that is the question.

Whether 'tis nobler, in the mind to suffer  
The slings, and arrows, of outrageous fortune ;

Or, to take arms, against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing, end them?—to die.—To sleep !

No more ! And by a sleep, to say we end

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The heartache, and the thousand natural  
shocks

That flesh is heir to—'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wished ! To die—to sleep !  
To sleep ? perchance to dream ! Ay there 's  
the rub ;

For in that sleep of death, what dreams may  
come

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil  
Must give us pause.

The punctuation I employ varies somewhat from that of the editions, and I venture to think will be found more explanatory.

To be, or not to be ? To live, or not to live ? The whole soliloquy is confined to the question whether it is better for Hamlet to live on, or to commit suicide. 'Whether 'tis *nobler*' to begin with, imparts a glamour which is very imposing, until it is squarely faced, but only until then. For the question with Hamlet is not whether it is nobler to be loyal and true to duty, or to die ? He never contemplates such an alternative ; for to such a question there

could be but one answer. What he asks himself is only, whether it is nobler to suffer his present state of mental perturbation, or to die? Was ever the word 'noble' put to more ignoble use? For if he will not act, what does it matter whether he lives or dies? To die, or live, is equally ignoble. Again, 'to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them,' sounds very valiant, but it is merely self-illusion; for the 'sea of troubles' is not the conflict that may attend the execution of his father's commands; it is simply his own unstable brain, and to take arms against that, is shamefully to die. Objection has been taken to this line, on the ground that it contains a mixed metaphor. We do not take arms against a 'sea,' it is said, and 'host' would be a better word; but the 'sea of troubles' being but his own personality, the objection seems misplaced.

Proceeding with the soliloquy, we observe that the thought of death is very

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dreadful, until it occurs to Hamlet, that death is but a sleep. From this standpoint he takes heart again, for a death that is but a sleep is 'a consummation devoutly to be wished.' No thought of a sacred duty unfulfilled, but only how to escape the peril, and quit the troubles, of the day.

Then, he thinks again, in that sleep of death, he may have dreams. He has previously spoken of being subject to 'bad dreams.' Why then should the fear of dreams in another state, be a reason for his preferring to continue in the present? Is it not that he fears the untold duration? 'A dream,' he says, 'is but a shadow.' Here, in the busy affairs of life, one shadow dissipates another; but how will it be hereafter, when the shadow of his disloyalty will cling about him like a pall—not to be shaken off? Hamlet fears death, as does Claudio in 'Measure for Measure,' who pictures the spirit as condemned—

To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside  
 In thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice ;  
 To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,  
 And blown with restless violence, round about  
 The pendent world, or to be worse than worst  
 Of those, that lawless, and incertain thoughts,  
 Imagine howling.

A horrid fancy in every thought, and duration, remorseless, undefined, at the root of each.

‘ *There’s* the respect that makes calamity of so long life,’ that is, prolonged life—life prolonged beyond the grave. Hamlet’s conscience troubles him. He elects to live.

But why, instead of speculating upon what may be in the life hereafter, does he not quote his father, whose story of the torments of his prison-house should be conclusive for his purpose? Because he dare not. ‘His form and cause conjoined, preaching to stones would make them capable.’ This Hamlet can say to his mother, in his father’s presence, but left

alone, his desire is to ignore or forget. Little by little the vicious habit of procrastination has grown in him, until the thought of his father, claiming action, has become repugnant.

In a following passage of this soliloquy, Hamlet speaks of 'that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns.' A very extraordinary speech, surely, from a man who has seen and conversed with one who *has* returned, and that one, no other than his father ! It is not a little singular, that practically no heed has been given to this remarkable line by the commentators ; especially bearing in mind, that the whole fabric of the play, is based, and built, upon the fact of that return. Here and there, it has been regarded as a lapse. Some pass it by as having reference to a return in other form than the ghostly. Some, wilfully or not, are blind to it.

The line, however, is of profound significance, and far from being a lapse, is perhaps as eloquent as any in the play. I

shall endeavour to show how well it fits in with what precedes, and what follows. At the outset, we find Hamlet, an ingenuous man, mourning the decease of a revered father, and the ill-advised marriage of his mother. He suspects his uncle of treachery; but there is no tittle of evidence, so he can only grieve. The Ghost comes to convert his suspicion to certainty, and we have seen how completely Hamlet is convinced. But immediately on the Ghost's retirement, he begins to temporise; and cautiously to entertain thoughts which are subversive of action, and which involve delay.

As I perchance hereafter may think meet  
To put an antic disposition on.

In the next act we find him venturing to express a *doubt* as to the credibility of his visitor. 'The spirit that I have seen may be a devil,' he argues with himself; and he straightway resolves upon a plot, to have played in presence of the King and Queen, a murder, that shall correspond

with that described by the Ghost. Before the play is acted, however, we have this most interesting soliloquy, in which the good spirit is so entirely ignored. He has drifted stage by stage, through self-deceit, delay, and doubt ; and now, in the effort to banish remembrance of his father's command, he is guilty of denial. Where is the lapse ? To me, it seems that all is in ordered sequence. There is worse to follow.

Hamlet will proceed with the play, for he is committed to that, and his hatred of the King, provokes a desire to uncover his guilt, apart from any sense of duty. Beyond all this, such *action* must be very grateful to his inner consciousness, whose ' native hue of resolution ' has been so long ' sicklied o'er ' ; and it will also save appearances with Horatio ; for though he knows his degeneracy, he will make the bravest show he can, in presence of others.

The play is acted. Its success is all that mortal could desire. The King sees his

evil deed portrayed, and rising affrightedly, quits the theatre. Hamlet is half frantic with delight, and exclaims, 'O good Horatio, I'll take the Ghost's word for a thousand pounds !' So ends the play. The King stands revealed as a murderer ; the Ghost is vindicated—all occasion for doubt being removed. That is all. No resolution is taken, no thought of duty is entertained.

Passing on to Act III. sc. 2, we have the short soliloquy commencing

'Tis now the very witching time of night,  
When churchyards yawn, and hell itself  
breathes out  
Contagion to this world.

In the previous soliloquy we found Hamlet trying to cast out remembrance of the noble spirit. Here he has gone a stage further in the direction of contumacy, and now would regard him as an exhalation of hell ! This is a dreadful thought, and painful to harbour, but I see in it the

poet's design and his terrible truthfulness to nature. Hamlet had said before, 'The spirit that I have seen may be a devil.' He now seems to say, 'The spirit is a devil.'

In the next scene he comes upon the King upon his knees, and says—

Now might I do it, pat, now he is praying ;  
And now I'll do it.

In a moment, however, he finds a fiendish excuse for not doing it—

He took my father grossly, full of bread,  
With all his crimes broad-blown, as flush as  
May ;

And how his audit stands, who knows save  
Heaven ?

But in our circumstance, and course of  
thought,

'Tis heavy with him. And am I then  
revenged

To take him in the purging of his soul,  
When he is fit, and seasoned for his passage ?

Here again, we find him doing what he can to ignore the spirit. His father had

told him how his audit stood, quite sufficiently ; and there is neither room nor pretext, for 'a course of thought,' save such as would convict him of shameful disloyalty. He hates his uncle, and longs to wreak a vengeance upon him, but the motive which should quicken him to action is fast expiring. His father was chiefly solicitous that his wife should be freed from an intercourse which was as shocking to Hamlet as to him—for a time. But now, Hamlet can look upon this relationship, and yet sheathe his sword in presence of his opportunity, with the sorry pretence that he will find a more 'horrid hent.' Observe too, the falling away from that loving reverence of his father, who in his earlier remembrance had shone out as 'canonized' but whom he pictures now

With all his crimes broad-blown, as flush as May.

We next see Hamlet (Act III. sc. 4) in that thrilling interview with the Queen.

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How he loves to preach, unfolding her shame! In the midst of this the Ghost revisits him, and admonishes him to have compassion on her.

*Hamlet.* Do you not come your tardy son  
to chide,

That, lapsed in time and passion, lets go by  
The important acting of your dread command?

*Ghost.* Do not forget. This visitation  
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose.  
But look, amazement on thy mother sits ;  
Oh, step between her and her fighting soul,  
Speak to her, Hamlet.

It should be observed that here, as on the occasion of the Ghost's first appearance (never at any other time), Hamlet speaks of a 'command'; for in his presence, as in the sight of Heaven, he feels that

There is no shuffling ; there, the action lies  
In its true nature.

The poor Ghost departs, casting a last pitying look upon his son, and carrying back to his 'prison house' an added

anguish. How touchingly beautiful is this great soul in contrast with Hamlet ; so tender towards his erring wife, so merciful to his disloyal son.

Influenced no doubt by this scene, commentators generally, have regarded Hamlet as possessing a highly moral, and even religious, nature. Yet there is not one heavenward aspiration in all his outpourings, here or heretofore, nor one heroic thought. He shows his mother 'the steep and thorny way,' but he 'recks not his own rede.' He never appeals to, nor trusts, a higher power, save by chance as a fatalist. The scene with his mother is magnificent, but insincere from one end to the other. He approached the interview with thoughts of blood — actually contemplating the murder of his mother, in flagrant defiance of his father, whose charge to him was—

Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive  
Against thy mother aught : leave her to  
heaven.

He slays Polonius, and shows no contrition for his rash act, beyond saying—

For this same lord  
I do repent ; but Heaven hath pleased it so  
To punish me with this, and this with me.

He harrows his mother's heart with fierce invective, but every word he utters attests his own unworthiness. 'Every god did seem to set his seal' upon his father ; therefore he should have obeyed him. The second husband is 'a King of shreds and patches,' therefore easy to remove. The Queen is living in sin, therefore should be rescued. Who can doubt the legitimacy of this interpretation, who recalls the interruption of the Ghost at this juncture, in behalf of the 'fighting soul' ; and that he of '*almost* blunted purpose' (O merciful Ghost !) is under command to quit the country, and so is wasting what may be his last opportunity ?

Immediately, however, upon the departure of the Ghost, Hamlet, without the

slightest reference to him, resumes his attack upon his mother. Is there a deeper depth to which he can descend? Yes! and he finds it; for now in opposition to all he had been preaching to her, he turns round and counsels his mother to riot in an intercourse, the very thought of which had been as gall and bitterness to his chaste father. The passage is somewhat obscure, and Hamlet was in part speaking ironically; but that he could, almost within sight and hearing of his father, have trespassed so defiantly, is evidence of his having declined, step by step, from virtue, until he is now debauched. It has always puzzled students of Shakspeare to understand why the Ghost in this scene should appear 'in his habit as he lived,' instead of in armour as on his first appearance. The solution of the enigma, I venture to say, springs naturally out of the context. I have heretofore remarked that the Ghost is the stage representation of conscience, or virtue,

operating in Hamlet's mind. In the first scene, he was righteously moved, and alive to the call to action—a call which might have been responsive to public sentiment, for the apparition had appeared to the sentinels on three occasions previously. Hamlet had evidently been slower to move than others, but was ultimately stirred, and was then bracing himself for combat. That loyal ardour, however, was but short-lived, and now has given place to a state of feeling in which heroic daring has no place. The armour is doffed, and the simple habit now more fitly clothes the emanation of his recreant mind. And even in this meaner attire the Ghost will never visit him again, for—

Look where he goes even now out at the  
portal !

Ay, and out at the portals of Hamlet's mind have flown, even now, his purity of vision, and all true loyalty and sincerity of purpose.

But what about his spirited speech to Horatio (Act V. sc. 2)?

Is 't not perfect conscience  
To quit him with this arm? and is 't not to  
be damned  
To let this canker of our nature come  
In further evil?

Well, I grant that it *is* perfect conscience, and also that it is to be damned not to act. But Hamlet's conscience is depraved, and it is certain he will not act.

Does Horatio take him seriously? Not at all! His response, cynical as in other instances, evades the speech—

It must shortly be known from England  
What is the issue of the business there.

And there is at once an end to heroics, which have passed off as a puff into the illimitable. This cynicism on the part of Horatio, is a revelation; for it is not to be credited that he would have dared to indulge in it had he believed in the

sincerity of his Prince. Why does Hamlet never ask Horatio to aid him? He himself has never but once said 'I'll do it,' and then he withdrew his word with the next breath. Why not call on Horatio, then? Because that might mean Action, and Hamlet is Drift.

Thus then we have the stages of his drifting career from devotion; through delay, doubt, denial, defamation, and defiance, to debauch. Thereremains only, inglorious death.

Moving on, we now have to consider a soliloquy in Act IV. sc. 4, which more nearly approaches a recognition of duty, than any utterance of Hamlet throughout the play. Of this soliloquy, however, not a line appears in the First Quarto, and as the whole scene is forced, and dramatically at least, unfortunate, it is not unreasonable to imagine that Shakspeare interpolated it, in order more fully to reveal, his conception of the character. Be that as it may, the soliloquy is nothing but a long indictment

of Hamlet, in which there are many counts.

How all occasions do inform against me,  
And spur my dull revenge.

Sure He that made us with such large  
discourse,  
Looking before and after, gave us not  
This capability, and godlike reason,  
To fust in us, unused.

Now whether it be  
Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple  
Of thinking too precisely on the event—  
A thought which quartered, hath but one  
part wisdom,  
And ever three parts coward—I do not know  
Why yet I live to say, ‘ This thing ’s to do ’ ;  
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength,  
and means  
To do ’t.

Thus is Hamlet self-convicted. All occasions *do* inform against him. He *does* allow his capability to fust in him unused. As to thinking too precisely on the event, he does not think precisely enough, or

long before, he would have rescued his mother from the association he professes to abhor. He is too kind to himself, in saying he is three parts coward, for he has become a craven. While making this speech he is in custody of the two condemned courtiers, and is being hurried out of his country. There is no standing still ! At the outset he was a man wholly devoted and capable. In an evil moment, he gave way to ignoble hesitancy and doubt. 'The dram of ill' has leavened all the 'noble substance,' his finer susceptibilities are blunted, he cannot goad himself to action ; his lofty reasoning is but pretence.

The views here expressed are in no degree controverted, by the consideration that Hamlet, in certain situations, shows himself to be mentally, and physically, strong, and capable. He can be noble in bearing, subtle in argument, and craft ; daring and brave, when suddenly provoked, gentle and forgiving to his enemy ; and we

are in full sympathy with Fortinbras, when he says :

For he was likely, had he been put on,  
To have proved most royally.

The possession of these qualities, however, only accentuates his delinquency. Had he been incapable of carrying through the mission entrusted to him, the catastrophes would have been wholly inconsequential ; but the last scene is so loaded with irony, that any doubt previously entertained, must, I think, give place to the conviction that Shakspeare has little love for Hamlet, and that his great purpose, is through him, to portray the terrible consequences that may result from disloyalty to conscience. What a pitiful end it is ! Here is Hamlet, noble, and once beloved of all, wounded, and poisoned, in presence of a crowd of retainers, who cry 'Treason' as he does an act, in revenge for a personal injury, which, had he done it previously, obedient to conscience,

would have secured him possession of friends, honour, kingdom. But he, the rightful heir to the throne, having slain the villainous usurper, dies with the word 'treason' ringing in his ears. What wonder if he wrenches the poisoned cup from Horatio, to quicken his miserable end, for is he not a traitor! Hamlet dies in dread of the wounded name he shall leave behind him. At his heart there is the knowledge of his contumacy. Oh that with his last words he might justify himself before the world!

Had I but time (as this fell sergeant death  
Is strict in his arrest) oh I could tell you—

He does not finish the sentence—alas, what could he tell! Nothing that would touch the sentiment or charm the public ear. He cannot lie; and so his only hope is that Horatio has been blind to his unworthiness, and will honour his memory. But Horatio has not been illusioned, and we see how he deals with his commission.

There is further irony in the scene, for young Fortinbras, whose father, Hamlet's father had slain, in fair combat, in defence of his kingdom, marches peacefully in, and takes possession of that, which, from the first, was always within Hamlet's reach. Thus is the estate 'wrenched by an unlineal hand.' Alas poor Ghost !

Now as to the vexed question of Hamlet's madness. Was it real or feigned? The foregoing considerations preclude my entertaining any thought but one—it was feigned. But let us examine the question from an independent standpoint, and ask if it is conceivable that Shakspeare would have expended his genius in elaborating a character at such length, to be valueless as a psychological study?—as this would be, were we to conceive it as founded upon the shifting and unstable ground, of madness. Assuming madness, anything may be predicated of a man ; and one guess as to what he would do next, would be as valueless as another, since, when all is said

that can be said, there remains but 'a tale told by an idiot, signifying—nothing.'

But Hamlet's trick of madness, is fateful in the extreme.

Shakspeare, we know, has pictured madness in various forms, but only as the result, or penalty, of error. In this play Ophelia's madness is part of the penalty of Hamlet's error; Lear's madness was part of the penalty of his own. But to deal with madness in this way is a very different thing from the projection of an infirmity as the first and moving cause, of events. To say that Hamlet was mad, save in the sense that we are mostly so, is to traduce the great master in the delineation of character.

Hamlet feigned madness, and this was his ruin; for in the moment that he speculated on that miserable subterfuge, he weakened his command of friends, and situation.

The first note we have of Hamlet's madness, is when poor Ophelia rushes to

her father, with the pitiful story of how she had been affrighted. 'Mad for thy love,' exclaims Polonius. Ophelia: 'My lord, I do not know, but truly I do fear it.' It was nothing of the sort, but solely the skilful exercise of his perverted ingenuity, resulting in the first estrangement, out of many, that he must suffer, as the consequence of his cowardly instability. In the very next scene, Polonius reminds the King and Queen, that it is Hamlet's custom to walk for hours together in the lobby. The words are scarcely uttered, before he appears. Says the Queen, 'Look where the poor wretch comes reading.' King and Queen hasten away, and leave Polonius to encounter him.

*Polonius.* How does my lord Hamlet?

*Hamlet.* Well—God a mercy.

*Polonius.* Do you know me, my lord?

*Hamlet.* Excellent well, you are a fish-monger.

This, and more of the same sort, until Polonius takes his leave; whereupon

Hamlet, the instant he is left alone, throws off the mask, exclaiming 'These tedious old fools !' The next moment there enter Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, whom Hamlet greets with : ' My excellent good friends,' and ' Good lads, how do ye both ?' Here we perceive that with Polonius, Hamlet had unquestionably been *playing* the madman ; and it is safe to conjecture that in the previous scene, with Ophelia, and in that which follows, he is equally insincere. But why should Hamlet thrust Ophelia from him ? Well, he would be enigmatical indeed, were he true to her, while so untrue to his father, and his great mission ; and furthermore, he is unconsciously working out his own doom, which is to die unloving, and unloved. I may remark here, that Ophelia's obedience to Polonius, is a dutiful self-sacrifice, and her behaviour is in marked and pleasing contrast to that of Hamlet. Note too, that the roving and wayward son, and the gentle stay-at-home daughter,

show alike the most devoted affection for their father. Polonius was not by any means a man to venerate one would think, yet we see the son strung to the highest pitch of heroism in his eagerness to avenge his death ; and the daughter bereft of reason at his loss, twining sweet thoughts of him in her tangled memory. Can all this be construed as other than a damning reflection upon Hamlet ! Ophelia is but the first to suffer. When Hamlet had slain Polonius, he said ' Heaven hath pleased it so, to punish me with this, and this with me.' Yes, and it will ' please Heaven ' to punish him with many others, and them with him, for all his friends fall away from him, and everyone, except Horatio, is sacrificed to his insincerity. Hamlet, possessed and absorbed by distressing cares and moral weakness, which have grown upon him in consequence of his disloyalty, is now incapable of pure and constant love, and his conduct is characteristic throughout.

After his parting with Ophelia, he meets her again in the play scene, and there inflicts upon her, gross conversation, such as never passes the lips of other of Shakspeare's lovers. From the first, he had subjected her father to indecorous ribaldry, and when eventually he kills him, he utters not a word of regret for the loving daughter, whom he has thus bereaved. In the grave scene, he is very demonstrative, for the moment, but untrue as ever; for immediately after, we find him conversing with Horatio, not upon the sad event he has just witnessed, but concerning his adventures at sea. Then, his tale over, he bethinks himself of the scene at the burial, and says—

But I am very sorry, good Horatio,  
That to Laertes I forgot myself;  
For by the image of my cause, I see  
The portraiture of his. I'll court his favours,  
But sure the bravery of his grief did put me  
Into a towering passion.

And this is all the lament he makes.

But what should have induced Hamlet to assume the air of madness? A too cautious disposition. He contemplated failure, or misadventure, in the carrying out of his object ; and in such an event, should he be called upon to answer for his conduct, he would be able to plead his infirmity in extenuation.

Shakspeare leaves little room for doubt on this point ; for in the fencing scene, before the encounter, Hamlet addressing Laertes, says :

Give me your pardon, sir, I have done you  
wrong,  
But pardon 't as you are a gentleman.  
This presence knows, and you must needs  
have heard,  
How I am punished with a sore distraction.  
What I have done,  
That might your nature, honour, and excep-  
tion  
Roughly awake, I here proclaim was mad-  
ness.  
Was 't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never  
Hamlet.

If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,  
 And when he 's not himself, does wrong  
 Laertes,  
 Then Hamlet does it not ; Hamlet denies it.  
 Who does it then ? His madness. If't be so,  
 Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged :  
 His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy.

Now this speech, besides being cowardly, is demonstrably untrue ; for it so happens that Laertes is where he is, with the express object of avenging his father, whom Hamlet had killed ; and on the very scene of that event, Hamlet had repudiated the suggestion of madness, made by his mother, in soberest language—

My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep  
 time,  
 And makes as healthful music.

Mother, for love of grace  
 Lay not the flattering unction to your soul,  
 That not your trespass, but my madness  
 speaks.

Of course Hamlet's testimony in his own behalf, whether in one direction or

another, is of little value in any argument as to his sanity. But his conduct and speeches, read in the light of Shakspeare's ethical purpose, all fall into place, and their contradictoriness is understood.

I have observed that all his friends fall away from Hamlet. Yes, even Horatio ! And the conduct of the latter, is confirmatory of the argument here pursued. It is to be noted that Horatio, from the hour he was sworn to secrecy, never exhibits the slightest warmth of affection for his prince, and even when so profusely complimented as he was, makes no reciprocal response. His answers to questions are never sympathetic, but laconic, evasive, or cynical. When informed of the stratagem by which Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, are made bearers of their own death warrants, he exclaims, 'So Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern, go to 't !' and that he was angered at the news, is evident, from Hamlet's effort to excuse himself, 'Why, man, they did make love to their employment.' Horatio has

no confidence in his prince, and will not use a word that can be construed as trustful. Hamlet dies—his last words being ‘The rest is silence.’ Alas, it is not so ! The Ambassador from England arrives upon the scene, to tell the King his commission is fulfilled—Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Seeing the King slain, he asks, ‘Where should we have our thanks ?’ To him Horatio replies—

Not from his mouth,  
Had it the ability of life to thank you.  
*He* never gave commandment for their  
death.

And so, this infamous deed returns, to plague the inventor. What a splendid opportunity Hamlet had when he discovered the King’s plot against him, to win back (supposing it lost) the allegiance of his old schoolfellows, who were acting in ignorance, by showing them the vile mission on which they were employed ! But Hamlet never takes the braver course.

He sacrifices his friends, and now Horatio is the one to disturb the silence of the tomb, and fix a stigma on his name. Oh, but did not Horatio, give expression to that most beautiful sentiment upon his death :

Now cracks a noble heart ! Good night  
sweet prince ;  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.

Yes it is very graceful, and courtier-like, but he did not drink the poison ; and wounded and dying though he was, Hamlet was allowed to wrench the cup from him. It was not Horatio either who singled out Hamlet from the dead for special distinction. He would have had *all alike*,

High on a stage placéd to the view,

from which stage he was prepared to make a statement about as free from affectionate bias, as a constable's version of a row. And it is safe to prophesy that

to-morrow he will be more surely, and profitably attached to Fortinbras than ever he was to Hamlet.

Horatio is a very level-headed character, and his speech to the Ghost sufficiently proves him to be keenly alive to self-interest. There were two others present on that occasion, but they were quite ignored—

If there be any good thing to be done  
That may to thee do ease, and grace to *me*,  
Speak to me.  
Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life  
Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,  
Speak of it.

It will also be noted that throughout he loses nothing of the confidence of the King and Queen by reason of his friendship for Hamlet; and that there is no word of protest, warning, grief or sympathy on his prince's departure for England. For all this I have some respect for Horatio—a sound man in a profligate court. There was a time

when Hamlet would have found him of inestimable service ; but he forfeited his opportunity, and it soon became apparent to Horatio that his prince was not a man to incur risks with. After this he keeps a careful watch upon his words and demeanour, which are void of offence, and nothing more. All this seems very harsh, but I hold it to be true. Shakspeare is a stern moralist, and remorseless in the infliction of penalties. As with Macbeth, so with Hamlet,

Naught 's had : all 's spent ;

and he who would have ruled in Denmark had he been true and loyal, goes to his long home unhonour'd, and unwept.

A word or two as to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Goethe's estimate of them is outrageously careless, and untrue. He speaks of their soft approaches, smirking and bowing, assenting, wheedling, flattering, whisking agility, wagging of tail,

emptiness and insipidity, &c., the very opposite of all which, would be nearer the truth.

What they were to Hamlet at an earlier period, and upon their introduction to the Court, is expressed in the Queen's words :

And sure I am, two men there are not  
living  
To whom he more adheres,

and I find no single word to discredit their honour. Hamlet distrusts them, no doubt, but so he does all others, except Horatio, and Horatio distrusts him. There is only one line that would, for a moment, seem to justify a doubt. When asked by Hamlet, 'Were you not sent for?' there is an 'aside' between the two, but the almost instant reply is 'My lord, we *were* sent for.' Naturally there was some hesitation in answering at first, for it might not be agreeable to the King, to have the circumstance that he had sent for them, divulged. Horatio had nothing but his

good spirits, to feed and clothe him, and these men were not less dependent. For all that, their conversation is infinitely more free, open, and interesting, than Horatio's, and for humble courtiers, it is manly and brave. Hamlet rebuffs them—to his great disadvantage—and they perforce, withdraw themselves somewhat from him, and become the more attached to the King; but their honour is unsullied, and the King never ventures to breathe to them a suggestion, that his purpose in despatching Hamlet in their charge to England, is any other than to protect himself from possible assault. As to wheedling, smirking, &c., the following passages should be sufficient confutation.

*Guil.* (Act III. sc. 2). Good my lord, put your discourse into some frame, and start not so wildly from my affair.

*Guil.* Nay, good my lord, this courtesy is not of the right breed. If it shall please you to make me a wholesome answer, I will do your mother's commandment; if not, your

pardon, and my return, shall be the end of the business.

*Ros.* My lord, you once did love me.

*Ham.* And do still, by these pickers and stealers.

*Ros.* Good my lord, what is your cause of distemper? You do surely bar the door upon your own liberty, if you deny your griefs to your friend.

Rosencrantz is honest, and there is here revealed the malady, which from the first has afflicted Hamlet—an unwarrantable distrust of others.

It would seem that Goethe, and commentators generally, are alive to a certain weakness in their position, for they are at pains to invest Hamlet, on the one hand, with scrupulous conscientiousness, causing him to hesitate, where he should resolve and act; while on the other hand, they magnify the forces that confront him; and to shield him from the infamy that should attach to certain of his acts, they subject the other characters to detraction. Now

had Hamlet been conscientious, he must have been dutiful; and religion, in his case, would have been synonymous with duty; but he is neither conscientious, religious, nor dutiful. He is a man without an ideal—without imagination. Much of poetic expression there is in his language, but barely a thought that can be truly regarded as imaginative. Is it not, in part, due to the absence of the vitalising force of imagination, that he is so ‘unpregnant of his cause’?

The character of Macbeth is not involved. When first introduced, he is noble, loyal and devoted, but with a ‘dram of ill,’ and tempted, he falls, like Hamlet, disloyal to conscience, and to King. He ‘trusts home,’ an ‘honest trifle,’ from an obviously evil source—hears a truth that should only have been cheering, and is straightway in the coils of sin, out of which there is no redemption. And as we have seen Hamlet, receding step by step from the fixed goal before him; so

now, we see Macbeth, cleaving his way with ruthless slaughter, in quest of a goal that is ever receding. Their natures are opposite, their courses are opposite, but their offence is the same ; and who shall say that the active villainy of the one, is more censurable than the perverse and cowardly drift of the other ? It is surely not without significance, that of the *dramatis personæ*, the lives that are sacrificed through Hamlet's default, are more numerous than those which are chargeable against Macbeth.

Awe-inspiring and terrible is Macbeth's career from first to last ; but there is one thing to temper its horrors—the mutual love and constancy of husband and wife ; and in the subtle charm and dignity of this quality in their lives, lies the secret of our being able to sympathise, even while we tremble, in presence of such fearful episodes.

The stages of Macbeth's debasement are pictured with marvellous power. The

insidious suggestion, coming in the hour of victory and general acclamation, strikes upon a bewitched and too receptive ear. In an unguarded moment, the reason is taken prisoner, never to be free of galling fetters again. The efforts he makes to recover his liberty and self-respect might have been successful, but the instruments of darkness have found an ally in Lady Macbeth, whose ambition is a tyrannous force which bears down all opposition. The deed is done—the deed which shall to all their days and nights to come, Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.

Vain delusive hope ! Before he can flee the chamber, a voice cries, ‘Sleep no more !’ and the immediate agony of remorse, is but the prelude to enduring torments. The ‘golden round’ is his, yet only a barren sceptre in his gripe. ‘To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus !’ Banquo and his Fleance live. To the murder of Duncan, Lady Macbeth was

more than accessory. Now the initiative, and the ordering, is Macbeth's alone, and his wife is to be 'ignorant of the knowledge' till she can applaud the deed. Yet, he is not wholly steeled. In the banquet scene, we see him still a prey to fear, or conscience. For a moment or two, he tries to brave the situation, and would assert his innocence, but his highly imaginative nature gives way, and with hysterical laughter, he rushes towards the Ghost crying:

Why, what care I? If thou canst nod, speak too.

His wife sobers him, with the derisive exclamation :

What, quite *unmanned* in folly !

After this he descends into the Pit, and emerges therefrom—a devil. His wicked, yet loving and much-loved wife, who has been one with him in act and aspiration, cannot endure the agonising strain, and

dies by her own hand. On hearing of this,  
he cries :

She should have died hereafter :

There would have been a time for such a  
word,

To-morrow. To-morrow ! and to-morrow !

Creeps in this petty pace, from day to day,

To the last syllable of recorded time ;

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out brief  
candle ?

Life 's but a walking shadow.

I have altered the punctuation of this passage (by moving a period one word forward) to satisfy a conviction, arrived at years ago, and long before I began to entertain the views now enunciated in relation to Hamlet : and it seems to me, in some measure confirmatory of the reasonableness of the alteration, that it agrees, not only with the context, but also with my theory that Hamlet and Macbeth were conceived at the same time, to be each other's opposite.

Hamlet, as I have shown, is ever drifting. His resolutions are always quickly 'sicklied o'er.' He 'lets go by the important acting.' Time to him is of no account. Quite otherwise is it with Macbeth, and the above passage, with its immediate context, affords remarkable evidence of his invincible bent.

New forces of the enemy have suddenly arrived before the castle. Macbeth cannot leave his command, for he distrusts his soldiers, and has to make his dispositions. To-day he is hard pressed, but he has been pronounced invulnerable, and so he will flaunt his banners on the *outward* walls, resolved that he can '*laugh* a siege to *scorn*.' He has only to win this event, and then, with his wife, he will be freed the affliction of terrible dreams, and be able to 'eat his meal' in peace. While in this defiant mood, a 'candle' dies out within the castle—the light that had cheered and encouraged him, in many a dreadful hour. Her life

was in her own keeping : why did she die ? Had she but lived till '*to-morrow*,' there would have been time enough to talk of death. From the day of his first disloyal thought, he had ever been looking with sanguine expectation towards the '*morrow*.' Now, at the mention of the word, he is stung by the reflection, that his to-morrows have never brought him cheer—have only deepened his misery ; and he feels there is mocking in the sound. (And so there is : for in that word is revealed the folly of a too sanguine man, the irony of the situation, and the moral of the author.) There is only time, however, for the loving lament, '*Out, out brief candle?*' (Art thou gone, brief light ? compare '*Othello*,' Act V. sc. 2, '*Put out the light*') when, bowed and humbled as he is, he is greeted with new intelligence that should crush him to the earth. The instruments of darkness are being found out ; but his bent reasserts its power, and he rushes upon the foe, soon to learn

that he has been further tricked by juggling fiends. Yet, with their hideous mocking in his ears, and without a friend in the world, he bravely meets his death. And we almost mourn him ; for monstrous as his acts have been, he has somehow touched our sympathies throughout. A good man has gone wrong ; his sin was error. Hamlet's error was sin.

LLANDUDNO, 1908.









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